

BLACKFISH

By Lorraine Viade, Psy.D.



Everyone should see this film. It is one of the most moving, disturbing and thought-provoking stories I have ever seen. *Blackfish* refers to killer whales whose lives are defiled, disrupted and ultimately destroyed by the American need to be entertained and the economically driven places that exploit them. I will admit I was a big fan of places like animal and wildlife parks. Watching the enormous, regal killer whales and dolphins perform tricks was exciting because I didn't realize what was really happening behind the scenes. Had I known as a child that this was happening, I would have boycotted the whole thing a long time ago. I was caught up in the Shamu and Namu hype. I never considered the psychological damage that was being done to them by living in captivity.

Blackfish tells the heartbreaking story of Tillikum, who was ripped away from his pod as a young whale only to be moved from place to place and used for breeding. Confined to the equivalent of a maximum security isolation prison cell, Tillikum eventually developed clear signs of depression, and post-traumatic stress. Forced away from his family as a youngster, Tillikum lives without freedom and is expected to perform at the mercy of his captors. This is the dark side of the industry that is brought to light by the film. The lives of the trainers were also negatively affected.

Tillikum eventually killed several trainers and the clips showing the humans interacting with these magnificent giants make the story equally tragic for both the killer and the victim. The trainers were clearly dedicated individuals whose dreams were to develop bonds with these creatures. In reality, they could never be certain that the affection for them was mutual. What was made very clear though was the intelligence and human-like attachments these killer whales have for their children. Once you see what these animals go through, the way they are trained, the limited spaces they live in and the callous expectation that animals from different families can just live together, you will think twice before making that trip to an animal or wildlife park. What happened to these

trainers could have been prevented by taking better precautions, but the real tragedy beyond the loss of human lives is the ongoing struggle these animals have.

Sadly, the film reminded me so much of our foster children who often suffer at the hands of other children from other families in the group home setting. And just as we expect these children to perform to our expectations after the ongoing trauma they have endured, they resort to hurting others or themselves. Their spirits broken, they act out with aggression and desperation because the frustration is too much to tolerate. The clear parallels between confined wild animals and the children living in our foster care system are stunning. What is the impact of being confined and isolated, away from loved ones with no hope of being reunited? We see it all the time in our youth who are abandoned to the system. They suffer, they make others suffer and they strike back. They try to kill themselves or they attack others. If you want to see the psychology of a child who is removed from home and forced to conform to place after place, see *Blackfish*. It will open your eyes to the effects of trauma over time.

I give *Blackfish* five killer whales. Please do not let small children watch this as they will be disturbed. I was.

